

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

WHAT TO DO WITH DYING?

April 10, 2011

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John 11:17-44

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' ²³ Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴ Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' ²⁵ Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷ She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁷ But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

A week or so ago I brought some old family video tapes here to the church to glance at them and determine which ones still needed to be transferred to DVD. It is hard to find a VHS player and I think we have three of them here at the church. I am about 10 years behind technology. I figure that by the time I have the VHS tapes all transferred to disc, that medium will be obsolete. Anyway, I took advantage of the equipment here for a trip down memory lane.

The first tape I viewed was from a time in which Maren was a little baby, over twenty years ago now. I watched her pull herself up to the coffee table, take her first steps, and hear her scream at the top of her lungs, with fists clenched, "Daa-deeee!" It was really quite enjoyable to have a few moments to privately reminisce about those days. It is hard for me to believe that the little baby I was watching has now grown into such a beautiful young woman and will be graduating from college in a few weeks.

As I continued to watch that tape, my mood grew more somber. There on the screen was Chelsea, the dog that Laura and I adopted soon after we were married. She died shortly before Amelia was born but on that day was very much alive, frolicking in the snow. And there was my mother, who died in 2001 and who was rendered speechless by a stroke in 1991. But on that day she was talking and singing and laughing heartily. My eyes began to water.

Suddenly I began to contemplate the march of time. My kids are growing older faster than I can even fathom. Parts of my life so long ago feel more like my imagination than the reality that they were. When I look at pictures of my high school and college friends, they all look older even if I don't. When I flip through the pages of the directories of churches I have served in Illinois, in West Bloomfield, and in Salt Lake City, I see names of folk whom I have known and loved and yet who now have died. While watching that old video tape, I was compelled to consider the finite nature of my own human condition.

The other night Laura attended a reunion with people with whom she worked with at Ford Motor Company over 15 years ago. Before she left she made mental notes of some of the people she couldn't wait to see. Sadly she discovered that many of those she worked with were already deceased.

St. Augustine once told of a doctor called to a house to tend to a seriously ill man. The doctor performed several tasks of examination and then stood and simply observed the sick man. Finally he just shook his head and said, "This man is bad off! He will not get out of this alive!" St. Augustine went on to say that someone looking into our crib on the very first day of our life could say the exact same thing about us. "He or she will not get out of this alive." None of us will get out of this life alive. We are all terminal. The question then becomes, "What do we do with our dying?"

Perhaps you think that St. Augustine was being entirely too pessimistic. I must admit that I prefer to avoid sermon topics such as this. I don't relish thinking about the end of life much less speaking about it formally from the pulpit. At face value, it is not the cheeriest of topics. We usually go out of our way to avoid talking about death. People put off writing their wills. I know of people who refuse to go to any funeral because it is too depressing. And it is hard enough to get people to come to worship without scaring them off with a lot of talk about death!

Secondly, death is a confusing subject to handle. It is not as simple as something like "love your neighbor." We all know what love is like. No one has returned from death to speak of it in a way we might comprehend. Sometimes preachers and teachers use the subject of death only to frighten the faithful in living differently. When threatened by the end of life as we know it, or the fire and brimstone of hell, one can find little comfort.

But today the ideas of death and dying leap out at us. This is the story of Jesus' friend Lazarus. It is strange to find this story here on the fifth Sunday of Lent. It seems more like an Easter story. Perhaps it is kind of a preview of coming attractions, this man being raised from the dead.

At the village of Bethany, Jesus grieves for the death of his friend. He has arrived too late it seems. Lazarus is good and dead and buried. The narrative is quite graphic about all of this. His sister Martha is concerned that even removing the stone to Lazarus' grave will produce a terrible stench. The situation is that lifeless. But Jesus calls Lazarus back to life saying, "Lazarus, come out! Untie him and let him go." Yes, perhaps this is an Easter story, not a Lenten one!

It is my belief that Lent is a period of time in which we are to prepare for the new life of Easter by being totally honest about our human condition. We must confess our sins and our shortcoming, those things which separate us from God, before receiving the gift of forgiveness and the acceptance of God. But there is more than that. We must also first face the cold reality of life's limits before we can embrace the promise of eternal life.

We may try to deny it, but if we are truly honest, we must recognize that death and dying have a certain power over us. The philosopher Ernest Becker once said, "All civilization is an attempt to deny the reality of death. All of our cultural achievements are our frail attempt to do something about our dying. The transitoriness of life makes life precious and beautiful, but it also tends to make life bleak. What is to be done with our dying?"

William Willimon writes that like Lazarus, we all are bound in a tomb called death. "Death jerks us around, determines what we do, fills us with fear. We build; we achieve, accumulate, and acquire. But everything fades, withers, decays, and dies. That somber fact accounts for much for much of what we do in life...We try to build some hedge against death, to take out some insurance against it...but there is still that mocking voice, 'It all ends at the cemetery, everything finally finishes with me. I am death and I will have everything. It all belongs to me.'" T

Willimon writes of a development officer at Duke University whose job is to raise money. He said that the major reason for his success in raising cash for endowed lectures and chairs and buildings at the school was a hope for "immortality." People believe that by endowing a position or event that they will somehow live forever. Many of us believe that by eating a certain diet, by following this exercise regimen, that they can be immortal, or at least close to it. We may not be able to give death the slip, but we hope we can certainly avoid death for

a long time. "We have come to believe that, if there is going to be any life in this world of death, if there is going to be any shred of glory, it must be of our own devising-self-created, auto-initiated."

We have been trained to believe that there is no problem that we cannot solve-even dying. We just have to work at it harder!

But the story of Lazarus reminds us that another voice is yet to speak. Jesus comes before the tomb, in which we are bound by death's limits, and he shouts to us, "Come out!" He then addresses the power of death saying, "Unbind them and let them go! You do not have the ultimate power over life anymore." Jesus shouts so that we will know that even though our human condition is terminal, he is now in command of death. Instead of being afraid, instead of denying its reality with frantic and useless action, we are to live confidently in each moment, knowing he will bring ultimate meaning. We are to live each day as he did on his way to the cross, knowing that our death may be inevitable but that through him opportunities for life with God can be discovered each step of the way. Instead of cowering in fear or living with resignation, we are to seek God's intention in the gifts of each hour. Such is the power of God, the giver of life, to bring life even in the face of death. The raising of Lazarus is a sign of Jesus' power to give life not only beyond death, but even now, now as we live with the fear of our dying. Death is not a curse that should frighten us into inactivity. Death is not a problem to be solved by our own sincere and frantic efforts. Rather death is another human condition experienced by God through Jesus and defeated and given meaning by the present grace of a living Lord.

I recall a powerful moment in my life, about a month before my mother died. I had flown in from Utah to visit my parents. It was to be the last time I saw my mother on this earth. I took her to the doctor that day. We found out that her colon cancer had spread to her lungs. While we already perceived that this advanced cancer was terminal, on this day the message sunk in clearly that the end of my mother's life was going to be sooner rather than later. As I drove her home, we were silent. My mother, because of her earlier stroke, could not speak more than a word at a time. I, her son and trained minister, simply did not know what to say. But I wanted to be somehow certain that Mom understood what the doctor has just told us. I finally said to her, "Mom, this is bad news. Do you understand what the doctor just said?" Mom nodded her head. I continued, "This means that you are going to be very sick soon and that there is nothing we can do to make you better." Again she nodded her head and this time uttered a strong, "Yes." At that moment tears were running down my cheeks as I steered the car from Greenville to Stanton. "Mom," I said, "I wish you didn't have to go through this. Are you scared?" With that she looked right at me and firmly said, "No!" Then she took her hand and gently tapped her heart.

I can't be completely certain what my mother was trying to tell me that day. But what I took from that tearful conversation was that she was already walking confidently with God. She viewed dying the same way she viewed living, with the peace and confidence that came from her faith. Perhaps long ago she had heard the voice of Jesus as he stood outside the tomb of Lazarus, "Come out! Rise up! Be unbound! I am the resurrection and the life. Live!" I do know that she believed that no matter what happened to her, she was always living with the source and sustainer of eternal life. Her hope was in the love of God in life as well as death.

What to do with dying? We can try to avoid it. We can deny its inevitability. We can live in fear of its ultimate power over us. We can spend our days futilely trying to create our own immortality. Or we can hear the words of the Lord of Life. He calls us to rise from our fear of our human limits. He commands us to leave behind the shackles of our frantic and false attempts to make ourselves eternal. He reminds us that when he is present, life always breaks out, even in the face of death. Such is our hope, even before Easter. The power of God through Jesus the Christ has defeated death.